



Smoke Signals

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Smoke Signals



‘Architecture and film are the only two important art forms of our time’. So suggested Le Corbusier after meeting the Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein. If this is true, then it may be because they share many of the same concerns, and that two of their fundamental materials, are light and time.

Anyone who has visited the Venice Architecture Biennale over the last decade or so could be easily forgiven for thinking that they were attending the Venice Film Festival. Such is the important role film now plays in describing and communicating architecture. Easily absorbed into the discipline, and culturally significant by embedding a relatively young art form within that of an ancient one; architecture made cinema, before cinema made architecture.

Having a Cigarette with Álvaro Siza offers a modest and beautiful insight into this special relationship. Perhaps not for the fumiphobic, it is filmed mainly in Siza’s office in Oporto, as a series of conversations between the architect the camera, and a cigarette.

We are offered a number of meditations on architecture and the role of the architect: how to define architecture; how we should approach new technologies; what role the architect should and can play in relation to housing; and to ask some open ended philosophical questions. ‘Architects don’t invent anything, they just transform reality’ he tells us, dispensing at once with any claims beyond the disciplines existing wide intellectual reach. How clients perceive architects, the rise of the project manager in controlling projects, questions of architecture as an art or profession, and many more such discussions evolve throughout the film. Several of these demand deeper reflection as they

follow on from each other -like his cigarettes- in a slow burn of thought.

His words, and indeed the structure of the film, contrast strongly with the recurrent media need to reduce architecture into small sound bites. Instead, here the wisdom and experience of this 84 year old architect whose work has emerged from his strong belief in the social purpose of architecture, and within his deeply rooted Portuguese culture, offers a disarmingly humble but profound set of values. He tells us it is important to be aware of continuity in architecture, not just generationally, such as the way he works with and inspires each new group of young architects that come to work in his office (he likes working with old ones too he tells us, ‘but there are less of them around...’), but as he suggests, architecture connects across the centuries through the basic needs for shelter and comfort amidst the forces of nature. For him architecture is essentially unchanging, with one generation passing on its values to the next, however disruptive it might seem at the time. ‘The middle ages are still within what we do’, he assures us.

On working with the computer he says ‘We have several instruments for our work, and we must use them all’, but that, ‘paper and models compliment the computer’, ‘here in the office I usually say to those working with me, If I see them gazing at a screen, I ask them if they haven’t got a pencil and paper to draw something’.

This film is deliberately and wonderfully slow in pace. Architecture and film need time. Resisting the frenetic speed and fast cutting of many films, it is a meditation on the power of the moving image to collect and listen to simple things about

architecture, about life, rich in the delight of the ordinary, and like Siza’s architecture nuanced in a rhythmical pattern of conversation and creativity.

With a pen in one hand, a cigarette in the other, ethereal plumes of cigarette smoke trace out the movements and gestures of the architect’s hand, as he creates each drawing. ‘I can begin a drawing with very little information, and then as I develop it, I get more information’. ‘I draw a lot because I like drawing...I have ever since I was a small child...its another tool and its quick’.

While this is a film about many things, it reveals Siza to be a remarkable storyteller, artist and architect. Anyone who has read his essays on such diverse subjects as: living in a house, Alvar Aalto, On design, and the Villa Savoye, knows what an evocative writer he is. His drawings take on this narrative capacity too, as he pulls in everything from the world around him (and his imagination) to talk to and shape his buildings, including often himself.

A series of filmic vignettes are placed between the conversations (Films within the film) presenting studies of some of Siza’s key buildings. Short evocative cinematic explorations in space, context, inhabitation, light and materials, the buildings come alive through the medium of film. At the Church of Santa Maria Marco de Canavezes the white render is weathering with age and the long horizontal window gives its own cinematic glimpse of life outside. Inside shimmering in the semi-darkness, are the glazed tiles rippling with light as the camera moves from space to space. We watch as the giant doors to the church open slowly to reveal a vertical slot of pure blue Portuguese sky. In Berlin at the Schlesisches Tor Housing we look through the eye of the

oculi in the parapet wall, framing views across the city with the architecture, before the camera pans back to watch the roof being repaired. Waves crash in towards the swimming pool at Leca da Palmeira, while architecture students sit in silent study in the library at the Faculty of Architecture in Oporto or scuttle up and down the ramps with their portfolios. At the housing at Bouca people are going about their lives, climbing stairs and hanging out washing while the soundtrack is filled with children playing. Architecture, life and film are talking to each other.

For 52 minutes we are held in the mesmerizing space of Siza’s architecture. Carefully made by its director Iain Dilthey, the film reveals Siza’s humble personality and the subtle mastery of his architectural craft.

Towards the end of the film Eduardo Souto de Moura (who joins Siza several times in the conversations and who works in the same building) asks Siza, as they both sit around a table discussing architecture, does he want to say anything more? Looking down at his drawing seemingly oblivious to everything apart from his drawing, the silent Siza does not respond. De Moura looks straight into the camera and makes a face in an Oliver Hardy like moment, signaling to us who are eavesdropping through film on their conversation, that perhaps silence in the end is a better way of understanding architecture.

But that Álvaro Siza Vieira does indeed have a lot more to say in his work: in his buildings, in his beautiful drawings, and in his words, is something we should all continue to celebrate, in architecture and in film. ○

Paul Clarke

***Having a cigarette
with Alvaro Siza
A film by Iain Dilthey***

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